

Latin of the New World: Webinar December 2015
Presented by Rose Williams

NB Slide numbers are given, but all pictures on the slides are given in the text. The Powerpoint is only necessary for oral presentation.

Slide 1

Literature written in New Spain; Closely Modeled on Ancient Writers such as Caesar and Vergil

I have thoroughly enjoyed several years' research and the writing of my new book *Latin of New Spain*. It has works by six major writers; today we are concentrating on excerpts from it showing how its writers made use of Caesar and Vergil in expressing their New World experiences.

Hispanic explorers who began to come to the New World in 1492 had a Renaissance love for Golden Age Rome and all it embodied. And that was a very good thing. As Jose de Acosta observed, they received little enough encouragement from their own time. Writers of their time denied the existence of the Western Hemisphere, or at best, said it was a "Torrid Zone" of uninhabitable burning desert.

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Acosta *De natura novi orbis* Book 1 Chapters 24

apud nostros vero scriptores vix huius orbis vestigia extant, adeo ut quidam non solum homines, sed etiam terram hanc et caelum ipsum hoc// de natura rerum, abstulerint
among our writers indeed scarcely any traces exist, as they denied not only men, but even this land and this sky itself (to exist) according to the nature of things;

It is not surprising that the explorers turned to the methods and language of Caesar in approaching unknown lands and peoples.

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In the autumn of 1492, Columbus quickly claimed the first island he reached for the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella who had sent him West. In this he appears to have been unhindered by the natives, who hid as he approached and were only found with some difficulty.

Much of Columbus' report is modeled on that of Caesar when describing peoples he has encountered in previously unknown territories.

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Caesar had begun his report of his explorations in Gaul by observing the peoples and their characteristics. (*I am giving these passages in Latin and English to compare Columbus's Latin with that of Caesar.*)

Caesar DBG 1.1 Observations on Culture

Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres ... Hi omnes linguis, institutis, legibus inter se differunt.

Gaul is all divided into three parts... All these differ among themselves in language, institutions and laws.

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Columbus' Observations on Culture

Following the example of Caesar, Columbus carefully evaluated the natives he encountered in terms of culture and potential for cohesion. Columbus says of the island natives

In omnibus his insulis nulla est diversitas inter gentis effigies, nulla in moribus atque loquela (*Epistola de Insulis Nuper Repertis 1493*) "*In all these islands there is no diversity among the groups in appearance, none in customs or language*" (*Latin of New Spain TM p 88*).

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Before he could make this evaluation, however, Columbus had to meet some natives, which was not easy.

cum incolis loqui nequibam. Quare simul ac nos videbant, surripiabant fugam. (*Epistola de Insulis Nuper Repertis 1493*)

with the inhabitants I was not able to talk, because as soon as they saw us, they stole away in flight. (*Latin of New Spain TM p 75*).

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A Curious and Useful Belief

Finally making contact, Columbus encountered a curious belief which might explain the natives' shyness and which would help the Spaniards later.

Immo firmissime credunt omnem vim, omnem potentiam, omnia denique bona esse in caelo, meque inde cum his navibus et nautis descendisse: atque hoc animo ubique fui susceptus, postquam metum repulerant. (*Epistola de Insulis Nuper Repertis 1493*)

On the contrary they very firmly believe that all strength, all power, finally all good things are in the sky, and that I, with ships and sailors descended from there: and with this mind I was taken up everywhere, after they had put away their fear. (*Latin of New Spain TM p 85*).

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Fighting Potential

Caesar had continued by describing the Gauls' strength and ability in terms of making war. Like him Columbus describes the natives he has encountered in terms of fighting potential, or rather the lack of it.

Carent hi omnes (ut supra dixi) quocumque genere ferri. Carent et armis, utpote sibi ignotis, nec ad ea sunt apti; non propter corporis deformitatem (cum sint bene formati), sed quia sunt timidi ac pleni formidine. Gestant tamen pro armis harundines sole perustas, in quarum radicibus hastile quoddam ligneum siccum et in mucronem attenuatum figunt; neque his audent iugiter uti (*Epistola de Insulis Nuper Repertis* 1493)

“All these lack (as I have said before) iron of whatever kind. They also lack arms inasmuch as they are unknown to them, and they are not suited to such; not on account of deformity of body (since they are very well formed) but because they are timid and full of fear. They nevertheless carry for weapons reeds thoroughly dried (burned) by the sun, in whose base they affix a certain spear of dried wood sharpened to a point; neither do they dare to use these continuously.” (*Latin of New Spain TM* p. 80)

Like Caesar Columbus carefully records their dress (or lack of it) and customs of life. (*Latin of New Spain TM* ,p 80)

So in his letter he spoke of a gentle people with rudimentary arms who were very shy of contact with the outsiders. Columbus had been a trade representative for many years, and he quickly noted that the islands he was visiting in the Caribbean had excellent harbors and abundant raw materials, including some gold and metals, which could be exported to Europe. He also said that the simple peoples he had encountered were good subjects for conversion to Christianity.

Columbus was perhaps not the New World's first discoverer, but he certainly became its enthusiastic publicist. Columbus' letter to the monarchs and their representative was quickly sent to Rome, where in April, 1493, it was put into Latin and disseminated among the capitals of Europe. The result was a flood of European explorers. Some were interested in the conversion of the peoples whom Columbus, still holding to the target of his original voyage, called Indians. Others were interested in the raw materials he had mentioned, and were heartened by his mention of unwarlike peoples with very simple weapons. *En masse* they headed West.

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Among the Europeans who caught the contagion spread from Columbus's letter was a young Spaniard from Extremadura, Hernan (or Ferdinand) Cortés.



Cortés came to Cuba, proved himself brave and capable, and became *alcalde* (magistrate) of the second Spanish town founded on the island. He was fascinated by the stories of fabulous lands farther west. In 1519, he was elected captain of the third expedition to the mainland, an expedition which he partly funded. The governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, had second thoughts and recalled the expedition at the last moment. As anyone familiar with his history can guess, Cortés sailed anyway.

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Tenochtitlán, City in the Lake, Capital of the Mexica



He quickly found that Columbus' report did not hold true for the mainland to the west. The people he encountered were neither simple nor unwarlike. He fought and sometimes allied with the native peoples such as the Totonacs of Cempoala and the Nahuas of Tlaxcala. He constantly sought to approach Montezuma, the fabled monarch of the Mexica, called by moderns Aztecs. Montezuma long avoided a meeting with him, sending rich gifts including gold. That, of course, was a huge mistake. The sight of that troublesome metal only inflamed Cortés's determination to meet him.

At last Cortés was allowed to visit Montezuma, and the Hispanics were awed by his city of Tenochtitlán, which, with its aqueducts, paved streets and pyramids, looked like a cross between ancient Rome and Egyptian Memphis.

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Cortés once again turned to Caesar, who had sometimes made use of the religious beliefs of his enemies.

De Bello Gallico Bk I.50

Cum ex captivis quaereret Caesar quam ob rem Ariovistus proelio non decertaret, hanc reperiebat causam, quod apud Germanos ea consuetudo esset ut matres familiae eorum sortibus declararent utrum proelium committi ex usu esset necne; eas ita dicere: non esse fas Germanos superare, si ante novam lunam proelio contendissent.

When Caesar inquired of his prisoners, why Ariovistus did not engage, he discovered the reason: that among the Germans it was the custom for their matrons to pronounce from divination, whether the battle should be engaged in or not; that they had said, "that it was not the will of heaven that the Germans should conquer, if they engaged in battle before the new moon."

Caesar promptly attacked, and gained a victory.

Cortés likewise took careful note of the religious beliefs of the people *he* encountered. He records (*Second Letter to King Charles*) that Montezuma told him that their people had come to this place from a far country guided by a prince or god who left them, intending to return from the east. This prince or god, possibly the one called Kukulcan by the Maya and Quetzalcoatl by the Mexica, was tall, fair-skinned, and bearded, quite unlike the short, dark, beardless natives.

Cortés quickly accepted the designation as the representative, if not the personification, of the prince/god.

Also like Caesar, Cortés carefully displayed the weapon and strategy advantage that his band held over the natives. Montezuma had heard what Spanish weapons could do to the simple arms and armor of the Mexica.

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Tenochtitlán, The City in the Lake, wider view



Cortés carefully took stock of the amazing and unique City which was literally built in the middle of a huge lake. Considering its bridges for exit and entrance, he decided it could very easily become a trap.

For such reasons Caesar had generally housed his soldiers outside captured cities. Cortés did not feel this was feasible, but he made provisions for escape.

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et cum considerarem si incolae vellunt in me conspirare, ipsi commode facere poterant cum eo in sinu constitua sit civitas, ut supra dixi, et ammovendo pontes egressum et ingressum dictae civitatis facillime nos fame perire cogent, priusquam ad continentem venire possemus eam ingressus propere bergantinos quattuor erigendos curavi, et tam celeriter perfecti sunt et tales ut eisdem ducentos viros cum equis in litore exponere possem, quotiescumque nobis videretur. (Cortés, *Second Letter to the King*)

And since I considered that if the inhabitants wanted to conspire against me they very conveniently would be able to do that, since, as we have said before, the city is situated there in that curve. By raising up the bridges of exit and entrance they could force us to perish from hunger before we could come to the mainland. I quickly erected at the entrance four brigantines, and very swiftly were they completed, so that in the same (ships) I might be able to place on the shore two hundred men with horses whenever it seemed (necessary).

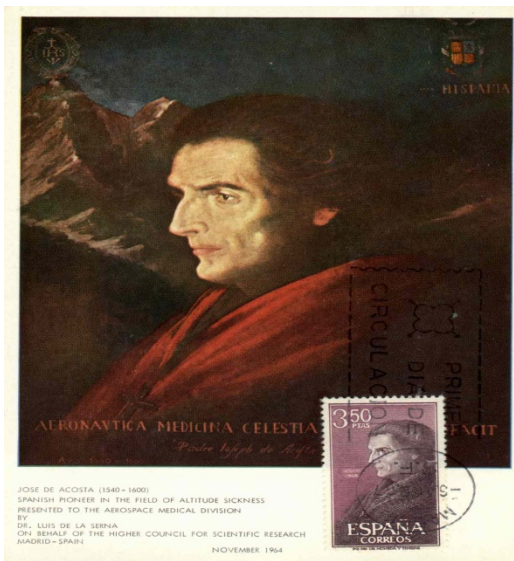
Montezuma became the virtual prisoner of Cortés, who ruled through him for some time// for reasons never satisfactorily explained, although they might have had to do with that legendary god/king returning from the east, and a belief that the foreigners had descended from the sky, The Aztecs revolted, Montezuma was killed. The Hispanics were driven from the city on *La Noche Triste* (Night of Sorrow) by a native revolt. Cortés took refuge in the neighboring state of Tlaxcala. Again following the Caesarian model, he made alliance with native peoples who hated

and feared their Mexica overlords. An army of Spanish forces and native warriors, led by Cortés and the native Tlaxcalan (Lash ka lan) warriors of Xicotencatl (shi ko ten catl) the Younger returned and laid siege to Tenochtitlán for eight months. They captured the Emperor Cuauhtemoc and the city in August 1521.

Cortés destroyed some of the great palaces as well as the beautiful but horrific temples where human sacrifice was performed. He rebuilt the city, using the existing roads, bridges, and aqueducts as well as many of the buildings. It was known as Ciudad de Mexico – City of the Mexica, or Aztecs.

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José de Acosta, pioneer of science in the New World



With and close behind explorers like Columbus, Cortés, and Pizarro, came the scholars and missionaries who had great interest in the nature of the land and the people, not just conquest, gold and trading. Acosta was one of the intellectual Jesuits who accompanied the explorers. In April 1569, Acosta was sent to Lima, Peru. In the following fifteen years, he traveled extensively in territories that have become Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico. He acquired a practical knowledge of the vast region and its inhabitants.

He also recorded his observations of natural phenomena, and a variety of new minerals, plants, and animals, as well as the social behavior of the inhabitants of those lands. . . . Acosta was called the Pliny of the New World because his book

Natural and Moral History of the Indies provided the first detailed description of the geography and culture of Latin America. Through his work on altitude sickness in the Andes he became one of the pioneers of modern aeronautical medicine. He -was one of the earliest geophysicists, observing, recording and analyzing earthquakes, volcanoes, tides, currents, and meteorological phenomena.

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Like Caesar, **Acosta** gave thoughtful analyses of the peoples he encountered, both consulting such resources as he had and talking extensively to the people themselves (*This slide contains Acosta's main points in the paragraph below*).

Possible Origin of Native Peoples

- **Among the Indians no letters are in use**
- **Our writers have long denied their existence**
- **We have gathered that men came here erratically and often accidentally**
- **There may be infinite regions yet unexplored with widely varying histories.**

“But it is easier to disprove false statements about the origin of the Indians, than to state anything about their certain origin. For since among the Indians no letters are in use, (there is) no certain record of their ancestors: among our writers indeed scarcely any traces may exist, since they denied not only men, but even this land and this sky itself (to exist); and he who promises to report exactly facts about the first origin of the Indians, and about the first habitation of this world, must necessarily be considered a man of great rashness. Generally however we are able to gather that a race of men traveled erratically to this new world little by little as time advanced, and arrived by degrees, rather than either in one prepared fleet or a great shipwreck. Although also some men may have arrived partly in these ways, since we think there may be infinite regions, innumerable other nations found and occupied in varying ways.” (Acosta, *De natura novi orbis* Book 1 Chapter 24)

Acosta’s detailed descriptions of the indigenous cultures he had encountered// have led to his being considered the first Americanist.

So Acosta, in true Roman style, recorded facts as he found them, and used whatever sketchy quotes he could find in the ancients to defend himself from critics determined to adhere to established beliefs.

Companion studies to Caesar are found in the three prose writers we have mentioned.

As the above explorer/writers turned to Caesar for a model; later poets turned to Vergil.

Companion studies to Vergil are found in the epic poems of Cabrera and Landivar.

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Francisco Cabrera (1918- 2015)

In 2004, the Mexican writer Francisco Cabrera published his Latin epic poem *Monumenta Mexicana*. The hero of his epic is Quetzalcoatl, the legendary king and god of the Mexica, who is an even more enigmatic figure than Aeneas. Quetzalcoatl came from his birthplace Amatlan to Tula, a mighty capital in what would become Mexico, and began to teach respect for all creatures and for the land. An eloquent natural leader, he was made king.

The epic owes a great debt to Vergil’s *Aeneid* and makes copious references to it. Compare the beginning of this poem with the beginning of the *Aeneid*.

***Monumenta Mexicana*, “Quetzalcoatl” 1-5**

**Mexīcae longaeua canō prīmordia gentis
Ēgrediā quae stirpe fluēns toltēca superbit,
Nūminis afflātū dīvīnōs nacta triumphōs
Rex dum iūra dabat Quetzāl cognōmine Cōātl,
Multā diū bellō passus longōque labōre**

*Of the ancient beginnings of the Mexica people I sing
Which, rising from the illustrious Toltec root, shines forth;
Its holy triumphs gained by the breath of divine will.*

*While King Quetzal by surname Coatl gave many laws
Having suffered long in war and in extended labor*

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Now to compare this with Vergil

Vergil, Aeneid, Bk 1. 1-7

**Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit
litora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
vi superum saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram;
multa quoque et bello passus, dum conderet urbem
inferretque deos Latio, genus unde Latinum,
Albanique patres, atque altae moenia Romae.**

*I sing of arms and the man who first from Troy
came driven to Italy, and the Lavinian shore,
having been much tossed about on land and sea
driven by savage Juno's deep held anger;
After many hardships and wars, bearing his gods
he came to Latium that he might build
a city, and the towering walls of Rome*

Now compare the fifth line of the *Quetzalcoatl* to the fifth line of the *Aeneid*,

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Throughout his work Cabrera relies heavily on Vergil for inspiration.

Quetzal draws the *auribus arrectis* of *vulgi et senatus*

Lines 107-122

Quetzalcoatl Gains Support

**Talia fundebat vehemens hortantia dicta
Auribus arrectis vulgi sanctique senatus,**

*These encouraging words he vigorously poured out
To the erect ears of the common people and the holy council,*

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Compare with Aeneid Bk. 1 150-152

**tum, pietate gravem ac meritis si forte virum quem
conspexere, silent, arrectis que auribus adstant;**

*Then, if by chance they have caught sight of a man, worthy
In pietas and merit, they are silent, and stand with erect ears*

Cabrera begins to weave his comparison of Quetzal with Aeneas, wedding his New World heritage to Roman thought.

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While he is not an outstanding warrior, Quetzal compares with Aeneas in the greatest of all virtues, *pietas*. This distinctively Roman concept encompassed love of one's gods, of family and fellow man, and of home and country. One must have all three to be *pius*. Only a handful of great men, such as Aeneas and the Emperor Antoninus, were ever called *pius* by the Romans.

In Aeneid I. 544-545 Ilioneus speaks to Dido of Aeneas' pietas

**'Rex erat Aeneas nobis, quo iustior alter,
nec pietate fuit, nec bello maior et armis.**

*Aeneas was a king for us; no other was more just nor
Greater in pietas nor war and arms*

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True to his Roman heritage and model, Cabrera has the elders installing King Quetzalcoatl stressing his divine birth and exhorting him to *pietas*.

Monumenta Mexicana, "Quetzalcoatl" 260

**Coelo demissus divinae stirpis alumnus.
Rex esto, scep trum que pius moderare perenne!"**
Sent from the sky, offspring of a divine seed.
Be king, and righteous hold the eternal scepter

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In 1781 Rafael Landívar, a Jesuit born in the New World published a Latin epic poem, the *Rusticatio Mexicana*. His subject here is the heroic tribe of people who founded that magnificent City in the Lake which Cortés discovered, conquered, and partially destroyed. Landívar begins with an invocation to Apollo in great Vergilian style.

Rusticatio Mexicana Lines 28-31 Rafael Landívar

**Tū, quī concentūs plectrō moderāris eburnō,
Et sācrās cantāre docēs modulāmina Mūsās,
Tū mihi vēra quidem, sed certē rāra canentī 30
Dexter ades, grātumque melos largīre vocātus.**

*You, who bring forth music with an ivory pick
And teach the holy Muses to sing melody,
Be present (and) favorable for me singing true if unusual things
Having been called, (be present) to give lavishly of pleasing melody.*

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Landívar follows Vergil's example very closely. He gives many **epic similes** in *Rusticatio Mexicana*. An outstanding one compares the Mexica building their city in the lake to a swarm of bees

"Lacus Mexicani" lines 179-181

**Non ita sollicitae carpunt per florea rura
Nectar apes densae, magnis alvearia silvis
Cum nova conficiunt, replentque examina melle.**

*Not so carefully a dense swarm of bees gathers the nectar
through the flowery countryside
When in the great forests they build new hives
And they supply the swarm with honey.*

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The above is obviously inspired by Vergil's description of the Carthaginians building their city.

Aeneid 1.430–433

**Qualis apes aestate nova per florea rura
exercet sub sole labor, cum gentis adultos
educunt fetus, aut cum liquentia mella
stipānt et dulci distendunt nectare cellas,**
*Such labor occupies bees in early summer in flowering fields
Under the sun, when the adults lead forth the young,
or with flowing honey cram their combs,
and distend the cells with sweet nectar.*

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A comparison of a Vergil passage with a Landívar passage will give us a better appreciation for the effects of good poetry and how they are obtained. Poetry attempts to evoke a whole picture – a feel and a sight, as well as a sound. In this passage Vergil wants to give Romans, who were never really fond of the sea, the experience of a rising storm. Juno has been up to mischief again – promising Aeolus, King of the Winds, her loveliest nymph if he will destroy Aeneas.

Let's read through the passage

Aeneid Bk I lines 81-85

**Haec ubi dicta, cavum conversa cuspidem
impulit in latus: ac venti, velut agmine facto,
qua data porta, ruunt et terras turbine perflant.
Incubere mari, totumque a sedibus imis
una *Eurusque Notusque* ruunt *creberque* procellis 85
Africus, et yastos volvunt ad litora fluctus.
Insequitur *clamorque virum stridorque rudentum.***

*These words being said, he struck the hollow mountain with his spear
And the winds like a battle line rushed through the given gate and blew across the land.
They brooded over the sea, and from the depths
Eurus and Notus and swift Africus rushed forth,
And they rolled vast waves toward the shore.
The shouts of men and the shriek of ropes arose.*

As we read this over, notice the use figures of speech. I have underlined alliteration, put polysyntedon in Italics, and enlarged and Italicized *onomatopoeia*
The whole passage has a feeling of unleashed power and fear.
Read the Latin again.

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Landívar wants to evoke something more unusual – a creature Europeans have never seen, and are unlikely to believe exists at all. He was a native of Guatemala in the New World, a Jesuit who earned a Bachelor of Philosophy and a Master of Arts degree. In Mexico he was ordained a Jesuit priest in 1755, and returned to Guatemala where he became rector of San Borja College. In 1767 Charles III of Spain in his push for nationalism exiled the Jesuits from Spanish possessions all over the world, Landívar sailed to Italy and lived in Bologna, where he was tutor in the house of the Earls of Albergati. His major work, the Latin epic poem *Rusticatio Mexicana*, which has led some to call him the American Vergil, was published in 1781 in Modena. The great poem expresses his nostalgic longing for his lost and distant homeland. He sings the praises of the New World, its beauty and fertility, fauna and flora. He pays especial attention to this amazing creature, which is common to us but not known in Europe

Rusticatio Mexicana “Lacus Mexicani” Lines 218- 231

An Amazing Bird

**Ludit et insignis raro discrimine vocum
Alituum princeps quo non vocalior alter,
Centzontlus, prisco volucris non cognitus orbi 220
Qui vocēs hominum simulat, volucrumque, canumque,
Et modulos etiam sociantis carmina plectro.
Nunc canit ad numerum, nunc milvum fingit edacem,
Nunc simulat felem, litui nunc signa canori
Reddit, festivusque latrat, lugetque, pipitque. 225
Inclusus cavea gaudet volitare canendo,
Iungereque in somnes modulis noctesque, diesque,**

We will read through the Latin, then go to the English translation, and then back to look at effects.

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*Also here plays the prince of flying creatures remarkable for his rare distinction of songs,
Than whom no other is more vocal; the Centzontlus, a bird unknown in the old world.
Who imitates the voices of men, of birds, of dogs,
And even songs measured with the accompanying lyre.*

*Now he sings in rhythm, now he imitates the rapacious kite,
Now he imitates a cat, now the signal of the ringing war trumpet
He gives back; he merrily barks, and mourns, and chirps.
Enclosed in a cage he rejoices to fly about singing,
And not sleeping he joins night and day with his songs,*

This creature sounded to the Europeans like a fable – more or less like Caesar’s little elk with no leg joints. But if you have ever had a nest of them in your backyard, as I do every year, they are very real, and very willing to wage war to protect their nests.
What are they?

Back to **Slide 26**

But Landivar knows that explaining the little rascals to Europeans will not be easy.

Notice that he uses personification in line 219 *The mockingbird is called prince of birds*
Also in line 219 is litotes – *none more vocal*

There is polysyndeton in. *Line 221-- volucrumque, canumque; Line 225 – festivusque ... lugetque, pipitque; Line 227 noctesque, diesque*

In line 223-234 we find anaphora--*nunc...nunc...nunc*

He also employs onomatopoeia (words that sound like their meaning) in line 225. *latrat, lugetque, pipitque.*

All these combined effects give a hurried tumbling passage filled with movement and sound. If you have ever been personally acquainted with a mockingbird, as I have far too many times, you know that the passage suits him.

Read it again in Latin,

So much of the southern regions of the New World reflects a Roman heritage – in architecture, laws and style.

This brief look at the Latin literature of the New Spain gives a taste of its ability not only to bring a better understanding of the history of our hemisphere but also to supply new applications and examples of Caesarian and Vergilian literature.

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